

The Cultural Component of National Security

di Tetyana Berezghna e David Stephenson

Since Russia's full-scale invasion four years ago, Ukraine has become the world's most consequential defense laboratory, trialing innovations that can strengthen European resilience. But the country has also demonstrated that national security depends as much on cultural identity as on military strength.

KYIV—National resilience has long been defined by military strength and defense spending. But policymakers are starting to recognize that culture is a critical component of domestic security for democratic countries.

The Munich Security Conference last year [held discussions](#) on the role of culture in European stability. Danish Minister of Culture Jakob Engel-Schmidt captured the emerging consensus, [saying that democracy](#) “is nurtured in our libraries, museums, cinemas, archives, and theaters – spaces where people learn to think critically, to empathize, and to belong.”

This recognition could not be timelier. Cultural identity worldwide is under pressure from the forces reshaping modern societies: war, large-scale migration, rapid urbanization, technological development, and demographic change. The erosion of shared culture and belonging has become one of our era's defining challenges.

Ukraine, however, offers some cause for hope. Since Russia's full-scale invasion four years ago, Ukraine has become the world's most consequential defense laboratory, trialing military innovations that can strengthen European security. But, equally important, its creative industries have become a form of strategic infrastructure—a development that the rest of the world can learn from.

Russia's war against Ukraine has involved a deliberate campaign of cultural erasure. Since 2022, more than 1,750 cultural heritage sites have [reportedly been damaged or](#)

[destroyed](#), over 35,000 museum objects have been looted, and the Ukrainian language and culture have been systematically suppressed in temporarily occupied territories.

But instead of retreating, Ukraine's creative industries have adapted and fought back, playing a central role in the country's resistance efforts. Far from background noise to the war, culture has helped anchor communities in frontline cities, tell Ukraine's story to the world, and maintain a vision of the country's future.

For example, while Kharkiv is only kilometers from the front, the city's cultural institutions have continued to operate throughout the war. After being forced to relocate its collection to safeguard it from Russian attacks, the Kharkiv Literary Museum has reinvented itself, hosting writers' residencies, literary evenings, and award ceremonies. [Nafta Theatre](#), established in 2018, is [reviving the work of Ukrainian playwrights](#) silenced by the Soviet regime in the early 20th century, staging performances in spaces that double as shelters. Nafta's artistic director, Nina Khyzhna, has described it as a process of decolonization.

Ukrainian culture has also become a powerful source of connection with the outside world, especially Europe. Oscar-winning films and Eurovision victories have turned heads, but quieter, more sustained acts of presence are equally, if not more, influential. Ukrainian heritage exhibitions developed by local NGO Pixelated Realities reached around one million people in 55 countries in 2022 and 2023 alone. Applications for grants distributed by the Ukrainian Book Institute to translate Ukrainian literature into foreign languages have increased substantially since the full-scale invasion.

No less important, Ukraine's creative industries and cultural spaces give young Ukrainians a vision of what their country can become—a difficult task in wartime. This is a country asserting its right to exist on its own terms.

Over the past decade, Ukraine's creative industries have grown faster than manufacturing and agriculture, according to forthcoming research from the Tony Blair Institute for Global Change. Creative industries employees are high-skilled, digitally savvy workers, oriented toward global markets and deeply invested in their Ukrainian identity. When the war ends, they will form the backbone of the economy and be among the most important drivers of reconstruction, sustaining the civic and cultural life that makes a country worth rebuilding.

Such a culture-focused reconstruction has already started in Lutsk, in northwest Ukraine, with the help of [Algorytm](#), a local NGO. Former Soviet factories, a mill, and an old post office are being transformed into galleries, a science park, and a book cafe—spaces that host robotics workshops alongside cultural events, and where the boundary between economic renewal and cultural revival has dissolved entirely. This is what recovery looks like when it is built around people rather than infrastructure alone.

Ukraine's Ministry of Culture is formalizing this approach at the national level through the Culture for Recovery platform, [an initiative to embed cultural spaces](#) within physical reconstruction. International partners have [committed €4.2 million](#) (\$4.9 million) to safeguard Ukraine's many cultural heritage sites through the Ukrainian Cultural Heritage Fund. These are not charitable gestures. They are investments in a resilient, democratic Ukraine, which is crucial for the stability of Europe as a whole.

For governments, businesses, and donors seeking to understand what a more resilient Europe looks like, Ukraine has demonstrated that culture is central, not peripheral, to achieving that outcome.

The task now is to support Ukraine in building the creative future its people have already proven is possible—and in developing a new playbook for other European countries to follow.